

# STARTLING STORIES

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## A Complete Book-Length Scientifiction Novel



# A MILLION YEARS TO CONQUER

By **HENRY KUTTNER**

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# ISLAND IN THE MARSH

By  
**THORNTON  
AYRE**

*Author of "The Golden Amazon," etc.*

**Hart Crozier Uses Earthman's  
Science to Solve a Venusian  
Mystery!**

**H**ART CROZIER was soaking himself in the undying beauty of *La Boheme* at the Metro-cast when he was annoyed to see the red glow of the special warning light installed on the arm of his chair. He ignored its insistence as long as he could. Then, with a sigh, he arose and made his way out of the darkened house.

In the foyer he found his assistant awaiting him—Mary Douglas, trim, blond, and razor keen of wit. She already had his greatcoat from the check-room.

"Come on," she said briskly. "A queer murder case in North New York."

"You know, Mary," he answered musingly as he jerked his arms out to struggle into the coat she held for him, "those top soprano notes of Madam Colbi are exquisite. Murder at a time like this is most inconsiderate. Who was the victim?"

"Sutton Wills, the interplanetary explorer!" informed Miss Douglas.

"Howling space devils! He retired a year or two ago to live out his life peacefully here on Earth, as I remember. Any data?"

"On Wills, none. I took the message on the televisior and promised to



The figure of the web-footed birdman flashed on the screen

locate you at once. Superintendent Burns is awaiting you at the Wills home."

As Crozier's private car raced through the canyons of Greater New York on the elevated skyway for special emergency traffic, the scientific investigator settled back in the cushions.

The inevitable law of progress had brought Hart Crozier into being. Back in 1940 he would have been regarded as an eccentric and dabbling visionary; in the year 2070, with its mastery of space travel and advancement of science, he emerged quite naturally as the answer to the more complex criminal problems of the day.

For crime, as usual, had kept pace with progress. The old racketeer of Earth with his submachine-guns and illicit preying on individuals was as out-moded as gasoline-powered engines. In his place had come the subtle and scientific criminal who made his playground the depths of space and who preyed on nations, who used science as his weapon, and who matched his brains against the geniuses of criminology.

**S**UCH a genius was Hart Crozier, a mild and bland appearing man in his late thirties, athletic but inclined to stoutness, and firmly addicted to the comfortable slacks of the turn of the century instead of the present vogue of military style. Ostensibly an inventor of minor gadgets—a row of which interesting little things lined the breast pocket of his sports coat like a battery of fountain pens—he had no official post on the vast staff of the American Institute of Criminology, which institute was the logical outgrowth of all the cumbersome law-enforcement agencies of the past. But he was the first man to be called in when something new showed up on the crime calendar.

Crozier's passion was music, especially the opera. His avocations were eating and solving the problems that the officers of the Institute couldn't crack. When a world-acclaimed singer was giving a performance, Hart could always be found just off the left aisle, seventh row, central section, of

the broadcasting theater. He never listened to great artists over television sets. He said that such instruments did not do the singers justice.

Now, soft hat tilted over his big nose, hands folded in his lap, he was apparently asleep as the young woman beside him crisply rattled off the meager details she had acquired about the explorer's death.

"Wills was found dead in his steel-lined library, a room which has a steel door and a steel-shuttered window. Obviously he was in mortal fear of something. He was found slumped at his desk, his left arm missing to the elbow—incinerated into ashes—disintegrated. The desk was not marred in the least; that's the queerest part of it all."

"Remind me to look up the libretto on *La Boheme* when we get home," Crozier murmured dreamily. "Who found Wills?"

"His butler—Rawlins, who immediately called the police. Rawlins' record is clean. He is well off, in Class N-twenty, has been with Wills ever since the explorer came home from his last trip to Venus and built that fortress of a house on the Sound."

"Any suspects?"

"Two—an ornithologist and his daughter, neighbors of Sutton Wills. They are being held for your questioning. Seems that the girl was on the veranda outside the library about the time Wills died."

"Ornithologist, eh? We haven't encountered a bird naturalist since we solved that stuffed pterodactyl case two years ago." Crozier emerged suddenly from the depths and snapped on the driver-microphone. "Jackson get moving, can't you? Register here shows only ninety. Make it a hundred and twenty, I haven't all night to waste."

The chauffeur obediently increased the speed of the atomic motor.

"Odd to kill a man and then reduce his forearm to ashes," said Mary Douglas.

"Damned peculiar!" snorted Crozier. "And I have to miss that last aria. How does it go? Tra-la-la-la. . ."

The girl folded her arms in resigna-

tion and closed her eyes. There were times when she wondered if the high salary Crozier paid her really compensated for what she had to undergo.

Ten minutes later the rocket car swept into the drive of the Wills place. The solidly built house had none of the graceful lines of modern architecture, being square and squat and grim. But there was a wide porch running around the sides of the severe stone walls. There was another residence immediately to the left, a more pleasing structure with an aviary at the rear.

**C**ROZIER handed his companion out of the car at the entrance porch where a couple of official cars were parked. A police officer admitted them to the Wills house, saluting respectfully. A second officer escorted them to the library.

Hart Crozier halted on the threshold, hands deep in his pockets, his mildly sleepy eyes taking in details from beneath his floppy hat brim. Superintendent Burns was in the room, his broad back to the huge fireplace. The square-jawed controller of the Institute's outside jobs was interviewing a girl and two men in civilian dress. The medical and fingerprint experts were busily working over the corpse and the room with their infra-red and micro-electric equipment.

The girl was dark-eyed and tanned of face. The older man, obviously her father, stood beside her, tall and bald of head, and wearing glasses. The third man was of middle age, with an inscrutable sunken face and eyes like black currants.

From them Crozier let his gaze stray to the figure of the dead man sprawled before the desk. Wills had been a large, thick-necked chap with forceful, rugged features, keen gray eyes, and blond hair. He lay now half across the desk, one cheek resting thereon, both arms out-thrust before him, a terrible expression of pain and shock and horror on his face. His left arm was missing from the elbow down. There was nothing extending therefrom save a little pile of ashes—not even a drop of blood.

"Come in, come in," called Burns. "How are you, Crozier—and Miss Douglas? This is Professor Benson and his daughter. Seems an open and shut case, but the circumstances are peculiar. Anyway, the professor insisted that I call you before I arrested his daughter for murder."

Crozier turned round. Plunging his fists in his untidy jacket pockets he strolled forward and eyed the girl in the chair. She looked up at him earnestly, twisting a handkerchief between her fingers.

"I—I wanted you, Mr. Crozier, because the Super here is sure that Dad and I are mixed up in Mr. Wills' murder." She jerked her head to the man with the glasses. "Honestly, it isn't true. It's just the way things look, that's all."

"You're the ornithologist?" Crozier asked, glancing up.

The man with glasses nodded composedly. "I'm Alroyd Benson, collector of rare birds. My daughter and I live in the house next door. Because we quarreled with Wills over the exact amount of land we were each entitled to at the back is no reason for assuming that—"

"Who rang the police?" Crozier twirled round and finally fixed his eye on the man with sunken cheeks at the opposite side of the room.

"Yes, I rang the police," the man nodded slowly. "I'm Rawlins, Mr. Wills' manservant."

"He rang us, yes," Burns corroborated. "Seems he couldn't get any answer from this library. No way in through the steel-lined door so only police could do the job. And this is what we found. But at the time we were on the way other queer things were happening. Constable Archer, who's now on duty at the front door, was patrolling the shore road running along the bottom of the back gardens of these two houses when he saw Miss Benson here up a ladder. The ladder was against the veranda which runs over the top of this steel-shuttered window here. When he questioned her she said she was looking for a bird. He brought her in here for questioning. I sent for her father as soon as I arrived."

**B**URNS looked pleased with himself.

"I was looking for a bird!" the girl cried hotly. Then, looking appealingly at Crozier, "I went to bed early tonight, but I couldn't get to sleep because of a constant scratching and whirring noise from somewhere outside. Opening my window, I saw a big bird perched on the veranda above this very window. Dad lost a huge stork from his aviary a couple of weeks back, and I naturally thought it might be it come home again to the wrong house. I got a ladder, came over the fence between the two back lawns, and then started to climb up and coax the bird. It flew away. Then that constable turned up and apprehended me. I didn't know Mr. Wills was dead until the constable brought me in here."

Crozier lighted a long cigarette and stared over the match-flame at the girl's father.

"Anything to add, Professor Benson?"

"Only that Joan is telling the truth. We've both been worried over losing that bird."

"And you, Miss Benson, say that this bird looked like a stork?"

"Certainly, it did. I'd have caught it but for that nosy flatfoot coming round."

Crozier cocked his eye on Burns. The Institute man smiled bitterly.

"But," he said sweetly, "she hasn't told you *everything*. She had this in her hand when she was caught."

From his pocket he pulled an object resembling an electric torch. Its bulbous end terminated in two electrodes, and upon pressing the button a savage streak of fire instantly incinerated the paper Burns held experimentally in the air.

"Nessler atomic flame gun!" he proclaimed in triumph.

"So what?" the girl asked impatiently. "Dad and I each have one. When roaming around at night I always carry protection. I'm not making excuses for it."

"No, but you could have fired this thing at Wills and incinerated his arm!" Burns snapped. He swung round to Crozier, "I've examined the

roof for signs of bird claw-marks, and there aren't any. But I did discover that there was a chink between those steel window shutters through which, from her position on the ladder, Joan Benson could easily have fired this gun! Wills was dead, in line at the desk—what the hell are you grinning at?"

Crozier's smile vanished. "Sorry," he said politely. "I was just picturing you on the veranda looking for scratches. I presume Miss Benson killed Wills because of some trifling argument about the land at the back?"

"That," said Burns grimly, "may only be the beginning of a deeper motive. Anyway, it's a start. I tell you, Crozier, all these two need is a good grilling to make them open up."

Crozier did not answer. He handed the gun back and then strolled round the room like a connoisseur inspecting an art gallery. When he reached the alcove near the main window he paused to stare at a curious plant in deep, black, loamy soil. The plant was not unlike a palm, save that it had onionlike knots on its stem. It stood directly in front of a specially constructed air inlet of misty glass.

"Ever seen a Venusian *olipus* plant?" Crozier asked briefly.

Burns looked puzzled. The scientist waved his arm to the plant.

"Study up on Venusian flora and you'll find that the *olipus* comes from the Venusian Wetlands, semi-temperate belt. Hmmm—good specimen, too. What's the idea of the quartz glass?"

**H**E looked across at Rawlins. "I'm not entirely sure, sir, but I think Mr. Wills once said that the plant had to have certain vital radiations from the sun which don't pass through ordinary glass."

"Sounds logical." Crozier started to hum to himself. "What the heck's a plant got to do with Wills being murdered?" Burns demanded.

"Maybe nothing," said Crozier as he dragged out a footstool and looked at the plant at closer quarters. The top-most leaves were brownish, curled and blighted at the end. Crozier dismounted, ignored Burns' clearly growing exasperation and swung round to

the manservant again.

"How did your master get hold of this plant, anyway?"

Rawlins hesitated. "He—he never told me, sir. But I think he brought it back from Venus on his last trip. I believe he picked it up in his travels. He once told me he had discovered that a war was going to break out on Venus. He didn't say how or when. I've always understood the Venusians to be a very friendly race."

"Why didn't you tell me that?" snapped Burns.

"Meaning no disrespect, sir, but you never asked me."

Crozier grinned broadly and winked across to Mary. He began stabbing his finger in the air.

"*Olipus* plant—interplanetary traveler—possible war. Make a note of those, Mary. Now, Burns, have a ladder put up where Miss Benson was found."

"The ladder she used is still there," Burns growled.

Crozier strode over to the window, flung back the steel shutters and scrambled outside. Those inside the room leaned through the window to watch him. Still humming to himself he pulled out a fountain pen torch and flashed it along the sloping veranda with its old-fashioned slated roof.

Evidently unsatisfied, he tugged out another instrument and sprinkled from it a fine yellow powder like mustard. He waited a moment or two while the powder changed color to pale blue, leaving black imprints in its midst; then he came back into the library and reclosed the window.

"Nothing, eh?" Burns eyed him in malicious satisfaction.

"On the contrary, the imprints of a bird's feet," Crozier said calmly. "This photonic dust of mine reacts like litmus paper used to react to poison gas. There are distinct prints of a bird's feet."

"Then that exonerates us!" Benson exclaimed. "There was a bird!"

"True, but did you ever see a stork with webbed feet?" Crozier looked round blandly. "For that matter, did you ever hear of a bird with webbed feet, the size of a stork, flying as high as that veranda roof?"

**B**URNS' face began to darken a little. He caught the scientist's arm.

"Listen, Crozier, you're not seriously trying to suggest that a bird, web-footed or otherwise, had anything to do with Wills' death, are you? I admit I missed the bird imprints, but I don't see you've proved anything. What we've got to do is to find the real motive for these two killing Wills!"

"In spite of the fact that Miss Benson's story now holds water? Be yourself, Burns!"

Crozier looked again at the plant in the corner, then at the desk with Wills slumped across it. Finally he studied the cindery stump of the shattered arm, brooded over the ash on the desk, looked beyond it in a direct line to where there was a distinct burn in the heavy carpet.

"As I figure it," Burns said, "Wills had his arm raised in the air when that disintegrating force struck it. I've used a piece of string from that hole in the carpet to the top of the chink in the window shutters, and if he had been standing, his left arm outthrust, he could have got it right on the forearm. I've checked up on that already. It would explain why the desk wasn't burned."

Crozier nodded. "While you were playing games you no doubt accounted for the fact that the window was not shattered by the vibration from the gun outside it?"

"I admit that puzzles me. Maybe it was the sort of vibration that doesn't affect glass."

"Give me that gun of Miss Benson's," Crozier ordered.

Doubtfully Burns handed over the weapon. Calmly, Crozier took a wine glass from the sideboard in the corner, directed the gun on it and pressed the button. The splintered shards flew all over the carpet.

"Doesn't affect glass?" he asked casually as he handed the gun back. "Better get Miss Benson out your mind, Burns. This goes deeper than you think. Now you, Rawlins. Did you ever see anything peculiar about your master's left arm? Any tattoo marks or anything?"

"No, sir. Both his forearms were

free of anything like that."

"Did he always wear a white shirt like the one he has on now?"

The butler looked surprised. "Yes. Come to think of it, he did."

"Is there one around that's not yet been laundered?" Crozier asked quickly, and at the servant's nod: "Tear out the left sleeve and bring it here."

"I can't begin to thank you enough for clearing Madge and me, Mr. Crozier," Benson said warmly. "It was so absurd to—"

"The whole thing's absurd!" snapped Burns, still fingering the girl's gun. "It means you had some other method, and I'll find it yet if I go gray doing it."

"I know an excellent hair dye," Crozier murmured. Then stroking his square chin, he wandered past the numerous book shelves, finally pulled down a volume on Venusian life and flipped through the pages.

"Charming people!" he commented finally. "Bald as eggs, the whole lot of 'em. Hot Landers, Cold Landers—all living together in peace and quiet. And yet . . . that hint of a war." His eyes narrowed for a moment. "I guess Wills was well up in Venusian lore."

**T**HE other man snorted.

"If you're thinking of a Venusian being back of this you can discount it," Burns grunted. "None of them are birdlike, anyway. And none of them have webbed feet."

Hart Crozier smiled amiably. "Nevertheless, I may as well read up on *olipus* plants." He tossed the volume over to his assistant and then turned to Joan Benson. "I think, Miss Benson," he said gravely, "that you should hold no animosity toward Constable Archer for coming upon you in time to frighten your stork away. He possibly saved your life."

"What do you mean?" the girl gasped, paling.

"That's what I want to know," added Burns impatiently. "First, you find tracks which aren't there. Then you holler for one of the victim's dirty shirts, and now you go nuts over a Venusian plant and want to read up on the flora and fauna—"

Crozier imperturbably waved him

into silence as Rawlins came back into the library with a white shirt-sleeve. The scientific investigator put it into his pocket and then cut out a small square from the dead man's right jacket-sleeve with a tiny pair of scissors and placed this carefully in his wallet. He beckoned to Mary Douglas and then took down the *olipus* plant from its pedestal and started for the door.

"Carry on your routine work, Burns," he called over his shoulder. "I'll be back as soon as I do a little checking up."

At full speed Crozier returned to his laboratory home on the Palisades. While Mary Douglas ordered a special dinner of steak and onions for them, he proceeded to scan through the book he had brought, study the *olipus* plant carefully, and then read through a file of information on the dead explorer.

After a sumptuous meal, Crozier struggled into a frock and hurried to his laboratory. His charming assistant followed him with the Turkish coffee pot.

"*Madam Butterfly*, please," he flung over his shoulder as he began adjusting a weird looking electro-microscope—one of his own inventions to study light.

Mary obediently started the electrical amplivox, and the music of the first disk recording of the opera filled the great room. Crozier contentedly bent to his work.

"We'll try the Prober first, Mary," he said.

This instrument was really a light trap. Light, science had long ago proved, expands outward at the rate of 186,600 miles per second. But it also moves inward at a mathematically slower speed into the microcosm. So Crozier had perfected the Prober which could follow inmoving light rays into the microcosm, overtake, and pick them up, even though they be a thousand years distant from their original source.

The girl helped him place the square of cloth from Sutton Wills' jacket in the finder and adjust the field.

"It's almost a certainty," the investigator said, "that among the countless atoms making up this piece of cloth

there will be one series which will show us exactly what happened in that library tonight."

He bent before the controls and operated the hair-thin line of blinding cold light vibration which focused itself on the cloth under the complicated lenses. The screen of the instrument came into life through prismatic devices. It showed all manner of things—the library, parts of New York, a boat, an ocean. That coat had been places.

**C**ROZIER gave a grunt and adjusted again with even more delicacy. For nearly thirty-five minutes he fished about. Then suddenly the girl gripped his arm. A vision of the library was there. From the position, Wills' arm was obviously raised in the air. Part of him, seen from the position of his arm, was huge and overpowering in the right foreground. Behind him were the library shelves, the *olipus* plant in its alcove, the shuttered window.

"Looks like he was either stretching himself or holding up something to the light," Mary breathed tensely, blue eyes on the screen.

They waited in motionless silence, but nothing unusual happened. All of a sudden the view whirled round as Wills dropped sideward into his desk chair. The scene became stationary on a pile of ash on the desk.

"Lousy!" Crozier said glumly. "He was killed all right, but by something that was never inside his library. Guess we're no nearer, except for proving that he did have his arm in the air when that vibration struck him."

He lapsed into thought, then presently he caught sight of the white shirt sleeve on the table.

"Obviously," he said slowly, "Wills used an invisible dye—if he had any marks on his arm—something invisible in ordinary light. But the dye that can't be seen by ultra-violet has yet to be created."

"Hence the shirt sleeve?" Mary asked.

"How delightfully Madam Colbi sings—oh, yes, hence the shirt sleeve. Invisible dye is bound, if constantly pressed in almost the same place, to

imprint itself into white fabric. Being unreflective to light waves it remains as invisible as on the arm, but the very warmth of the skin must impress it, particularly when a man rests his left arm down a lot as in writing, such as Wills did."

"You're taking it for granted Wills had something on his forearm?"

"Only logical conclusion. Stretch that shirt sleeve before the ultra-violet camera."

Methodically Mary obeyed. When at last the linen was taut she snapped on the camera's mechanism, waited a moment. Crozier still sat in silence, head thrown back, drinking in the trilling from the recorder. Then he looked forward again as the girl took the automatically printed and developed plate from the machine and handed it to him.

"So," he murmured slowly, getting up, "I was right!"

The girl looked over his shoulder at a blurred but none-the-less distinguishable map, small but concise, with tiny lettering at various points.

"Neat idea of yours, Hart," she murmured admiringly, taking the plate from him and placing it under the high-power magnifier.

"Dye did come out all right," Crozier muttered, as he stared through the twin eyepieces.

Part of the map was blurred, but in the main the faint lines and writing were quite distinguishable, mainly due to the shirt sleeve having taken the same position on the forearm each time Wills had rested upon his desk.

"Looks like an island," Mary said at length. "A Venusian island. See that arrow with 'To Hotlands' written after it?"

"I see it, but look below. 'Shaded portion indicating *ziterbuk* surface ores, fringed around with jungle and Wetlands.'"

**H**ART CROZIER straightened suddenly and pulled the book on Venusian life towards him, ran his finger down the index.

"*Ziterbuk*, page forty-two." He flipped the pages, read for a moment, then looked up sharply. "*Ziterbuk*, my dear young lady, is a rich Venusian



surface ore, difficult to find, but present in entire shingles in some parts of Venus. Worth one thousand dollars an ounce! Now we're getting some place! Wills was indecently wealthy, he'd traveled a lot on Venus, he happened on *ziterbuk* ores. So careful was he to make sure nobody else knew the location, while remembering himself, he mapped out the position on his own arm in invisible dye, studying it by ultra violet light when necessary."

"Check!" Mary nodded thoughtfully. "But somebody else knew he'd got this map, wanted to stop him, and so killed him and destroyed the arm with the map on it?"

"Um-maybe. Else Wills stole the location of *ziterbuk* ores and finally met up with his enemy."

"Which doesn't explain a web-footed stork."

Crozier relaxed into the big chair by the bench and mused for a while, pulling at his hair. Record two of the opera started off in a burst of melody.

"Whoever killed Wills was a scientist of no mean measure," Crozier muttered. "He used vibratory power to shatter that arm. Where is there a scientist on Earth with a power like that? Nowhere, or I'd know about it. On Venus? Possibly. But all Venusians are bipeds like us no matter what land they come from. Explorers have shown that by what they've written in that book."

"Wills knew somebody was after him, otherwise he wouldn't have taken such precautions to protect himself."

Crozier frowned. "A bird. Why the hell a bird?"

"Did it ever occur to you," Mary said, "that no explorer has mentioned *ziterbuk* ores in any quantity, certainly not in the Wetlands—unexplored territory which Wills penetrated. He must have done so, to have brought back an *olipus* plant!"

"Lord!" Crozier exploded, leaping up. "What a girl! I brought that plant just to look it over, but now I believe it has another use. There is still *another* type of life on Venus as yet unseen—the *Wetlander*. He'd have webbed feet, surely? Only Wills knew about it." He stopped and stared at the black, loamy soil of the

*olipus* plant.

"Straight from the Wetlands," he breathed. "What cannot the atoms of that soil show us of the Wetlands? Quick, the Prober again! Maybe we can intersect a group of atoms and reproduce the light waves which must have been prevalent on Venus. We shall see the Wetlands, which only Wills had ever seen."

He stooped to the controls again, brought forth a jigsaw of weird designs, crazy Venusian jungle, blurred trees, phantomic shapes. Again he adjusted, and again, until at last he and the girl were staring steadily at a typical Venusian Wetland scene with its vast sickly green trees and expanses of misty marshes. Evidently the atoms under observation had been in banked-up soil, for they gave a horizontal view.

**B**UT through the mist shapes were visible, moving through the air with terrific speed. Half-human, half-bird, they looked like something out of Dante's *Inferno*. This in itself was interesting, but even more engrossing was the fact that as the mist cleared very slightly for a moment there was the transient vision of a pale yellow city, strangely designed, the embodiment of scientific achievement. There was a glimpse of titanic machines, ceaseless industry—and all around the city the dull gleam that pronounced *ziterbuk* ores.

"That city is on the self-same island as the *ziterbuk* ores," Crozier breathed. "Those flying people live on it. *There* is where Wills got his rumor of war. War by them, the unknowns in the mist, on the rest of Venus. *Now* I get it!"

He fell silent, watching the reflected image of the nearest flying bird-man. When the creature came close enough for a decent study, the girl almost recoiled from her eyepiece in horror. The thing, two-thirds the size of a normal human being of Earth, glided to the ground and stood erect. It had a face like a gargoyle with the eyes of Satan.

"Notice its eyes through the mist," cried Crozier. "Infra-red rays. It can see through the murk. It has webbed

feet and rudimentary wings, but it propels itself by the ejection of force from that ray gun it carries. It probably slays by the same force, altering the wave-length by adjustment. Good grief, Mary, we've got to hurry! Maybe it's too late already."

They rushed madly from the laboratory. Instead of using his rocket car, Crozier led the way to the little private hangar where was housed his atomic-rocketed space ship. The pair of them bundled in and took off in a silent flare of orange light—a tail like that of a young comet streaming out to die away behind them.

As they headed into the stratosphere above New York Crozier flipped on his electro-magnetic space-eye. Almost at once the vibrator picked up a foreign substance in the amplifier. Swiftly the girl adjusted dials, fishing, searching for the source of that noise. Suddenly, almost like magic, the image of a dully gleaming yellow globe sprang into being on the visi-screen.

"That metal!" snapped the investigator. "The same as that used in the construction of the city on the island in the Venusian marsh."

"That's a Venusian space craft of strange design then," Mary Douglas agreed. "Our murderer must be on board—escaping from Earth."

"Right," grated Crozier, all his laziness burned away in one of his terrific bursts of energy that few people ever saw. "But he won't escape. Switch on the Prober attachment to view the interior of the globe."

Wordlessly the girl did so, and the figure of a web-footed bird-man flashed on the screen, bent over a queer looking control board. It was almost as if he were conscious of being under observation, for his beaklike mouth parted in a snarling expression and his beady eyes glittered. He reached over and touched a stud in a row before him. A flash of blinding light obscured the screen, and Crozier's little ship rocked mightily.

"Hart!" cried the girl desperately. "He's firing at us with something."

"Right," said Crozier tersely. "I had hoped to take him alive, but I guess he's too tough a customer."

The dull globe came back into view on the screen. Rapidly Crozier computed distances and ratio of speeds. He suddenly swerved his vessel to one side and then back again. He threw his atomic power on full and flipped a switch. There was a crackling roar, a flash of bluish-white light which lit up all space outside, and the globe on the visi-screen seemed to explode in a glare of orange hell.

"My new electronic space canyon," Crozier explained to Mary's strained face. "You helped me work on it. Well, that's that. We must make sure and see that a warning is sent to the rest of the Venusians about the menace of the Wetlanders. Let's go back and report to Superintendent Burns."

**T**HE agent from the Institute was impatiently awaiting them when they reached the Wills home. Everything and everybody was the same as when Crozier had left a couple of hours previous, save that the corpse had been removed.

"Well?" snapped Burns. "Just what have you turned up? Whom am I to arrest?"

"Nobody," said the special investigator, yawning. "Here's your solution. In the first place, Sutton Wills discovered *ziterbuk* surface ores on Venus, easily carried in a haversack. No mining necessary. Probably he found them by accident; we shall never know about that. To remember the position he engraved a map on his forearm with invisible dye, drying insensitive to light.

"But he also knew that that island contained a city of scientific power, beyond anything ever imagined in other Venusian countries. He had no designs on that city, but he *did* want *ziterbuk*. For a long time he got the stuff easily enough, then one day one of the city's inhabitants must have seen him.

"It is clear what happened. Wills knew his presence on the island would be misunderstood. To an inhabitant of that island the *ziterbuk* ores were valueless. Wills' presence there could only mean he was a spy, searching out the secrets to warn Venusian

officials of war to come. Further, the Wetlanders have eyes able by nature to see through mists. This one must also have seen that map on Wills' arm, invisible to our eyes. Wills knew that much.

"So he fled back to Earth and took what he thought were precautions. But suddenly things caught up on him. A Venusian Wetlander was sent to track him down. The queer creature succeeded.

"It saw him, I imagine, either clean through the walls or else through the chink in the window shutters. It fired its own deadly form of force through the only possible place—that quartz window behind the *olipus* plant. Quartz would permit the force to pass through without cracking. Wills couldn't save himself. He probably died before he knew what was upon him, and so his plan and his life were destroyed."

Burns remained silent, scratching his head. The Benson girl and her

father were smiling in relief.

"My own line of research showed that that burn in the carpet could also have been made by a force fired through the quartz window," Crozier resumed. "In fact, I knew that was the case from the beginning because the *olipus* plant's top leaves were charred from the passage of such a force over the top of them. Outside, the quartz window was convenient to the veranda. Obviously, Miss Benton saw the Venusian, not a real bird. Unfortunately, I couldn't capture the murderer alive. When you want the official evidence, Burns, they're in my laboratory. You can find me either there, at the Black Hat Restaurant, or at the Metrocast."

"Yeah—thanks," Burns said weakly.

He stood watching in sad admiration as Crozier turned to the door and caught Mary's arm. She looked back once and winked a blue eye solemnly.

Back from the hall came a few badly sung bars of *La Boheme*.